

Barkley 2012

I spent a few weeks thinking about how to write my race report. I often go into blow-by-blow reports because friends who are interested in the races or events I'm doing, want to feel like they were there. But no blow by blow would do Barkley justice. Or more precisely, I'm not a good enough writer to do an adequate job. Some of the other race reports out there are far more interesting than what I would write about my race. So I thought I'd ditch that stuff and just write about 'the other stuff' - stuff that's interesting to a broader audience of my friends (many who have ADD anyway, and are going to tell me "tl;dr" anyway). In my lame attempt at keeping it from going too long, I turned it into a prompted interview (easier than thinking of segues).

What is Barkley?

There are dozens of races around the world that claim to be the hardest or toughest or most physically challenging or most mentally challenging, etc. Some have some right to claim difficulty, some don't. The ones that are legitimate, I want to do. I like throwing myself against a wall over and over again to see how things will turn out.

A couple years ago, I heard about this race called The Barkley Marathons. Here's the relevant statistic you need to know: when I signed up for the 2012 Barkley, 10 people had finished the race in the TWENTY FIVE (25) YEARS since the first running of the race. Wow! A serious challenge! I *had* to get in, I had to run this race. I know I'm fairly resilient, mentally, though I'm not in the world's greatest physical shape. I can survive anything. I read that elite athletes had tried Barkley and after coming in from their first lap, they simply refused to continue onto their second lap. It's a five lap race.

Well, back to reality. I'm not an elite runner. I run most of my races with a backpack full of beer and I tend to drink a lot

of that beer during races. I recently ran a fairly tough 100k (Bandera) that had a good amount of climbing and was rocky difficult terrain. I fueled myself mostly with pizza and beer. I really enjoyed the almost 15 hours I spent in Texas Hill Country. If I was going to "do" Barkley in 2013, I had better get in shape. I contacted my racing partner and told him about Barkley. At first, he was uninterested. Then he did some reading... and had the same reaction as I did. He then suggested something retarded. "Why don't we apply this year?" (2011 for the 2012 race) Really? But, I'm fat and out of shape, I think?

Fast forward to a mysterious day sometime around the end of 2011 (you'll find that the details of the application process, the application timing, etc., are all somewhat closely held secrets... the field is required to be small and we're all fighting for the same entry spots!). I got an email from the Race Director. I was in. Quick, Race Buddy, you in? Yes? OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! What the heck are we going to do now?

Here's some more statistics for you: The race involves five laps, each of which is 20-27 miles in length. Each lap involves 10-12,000 ft. of elevation gain. If anyone gives you more precise numbers, they're full of it - only small parts of the race are on trails (the rest of overland, though forests, in rivers, over rocks, etc.), there's a lot of route finding involved, and you'll rarely cover the exact same ground twice. The race course record holder got lost for TWO HOURS trying to find book #1 on his fifth lap. It takes little old me 40 minutes to get to that book.

Speaking of books, each lap there are 9 to 11 books. You have to tear a page (your bib number tells you the page, you get a new bib number each lap) out of each book to prove that you were there.

So essentially, think 11,000 ft. of gain, 25 miles, or thereabouts. Could be 30 or 40 if you get good'n'lost. Ask some of the folks who took almost 20 hours to finish their first lap. Mostly off trail. A good portion of the race goes through briar patches. Briars hurt. I got my ear pierced during the race. That look is not me.

So back to my training. I decided to hit the gym. I live in Austin, TX, and while we have Hill Country, we don't have those kinds of hills. Best I can find, in 20 miles of running, you can get 3-4000 ft of climbing, and most of that will be on shoulderless roads. At the gym, I spent some time on the stair mill. It's kinda the same, right? (No. The angle of your foot is different; my calves were completely unready for the workout they got at Barkley).

What happened when you got to the race?

Barkley sounds hard, right? But I am who I am. I was 100% sure that I'd complete five laps and be one of the finishers. I was a little irritated to hear about all the super tough people who were coming to the race - I didn't want to be one of the ten people who finished this year... That attitude lasted right up until I showed up at the park on the Sunday before the race. Well, ok, I was still sure of myself until the Monday. On Monday, I went to scout the portions of the route that you're allowed to scout. I had maps from previous years (this is a breach of OpSec, and any current and future Barkley folks should be very careful with their race reports and pictures - don't post anything that shows the map! I used images I found and translated the route to printouts from Google Maps Terrain). The area I scouted roughly covered 2011's books 1 to 6.

The hills were so insane, and I was so destroyed after hitting the first 6 book locations, that I actually grabbed my phone and emailed my Racing Buddy and my Girlfriend, telling them both that I was thinking of dropping out of the race and allowing one of the wait-listers to get in, in my place. If you do that, the RD gives you an automatic "in" for the next year. At that point, I was sure I would not successfully complete even a (one (1)) single lap in a timely manner. The hills were THAT steep and the navigation was that hard. On Tuesday, I went out again and reviewed books 1-4. This further confirmed that I was totally out of shape. I knew from others that I would need to hit book one in under an hour (took me 90 minutes) and book

three in fewer than 3 hours. I was at 5 hours for book 3. Way falling behind. Panic.

My girlfriend's first email response was "who hacked Joel's email and sent that message?" Neither she, nor my Racing Buddy, had ever heard words like those coming out of me. It was completely bizarro-world to them.

On Wednesday, my Racing Buddy showed up. He was so surprised and caught off guard by my email, that despite the fact that we should be resting a couple days before the race, he insisted that we should at least go jog over to the old book one. Being only 2 days before the race, we set out on an easy hiking pace to get up the first hill. We hit the summit of the hill in 40 minutes "taking it easy" and conversing the whole way. We ran down the back side, again conversing, and got to old book 1 in 20 minutes. AN HOUR! Exactly the time I'm supposed to take?!?!? My Racing Buddy said "that hill wasn't thaaat bad!" That's when I let him know that he had just crossed the absolute easiest hill in the race. However, both of us were feeling much better - some rest and a buddy made the one hour trip feasible. Ok, back to my normal self. I'm sure I can finish a lap, and I'm guessing I can aim for a fun run (3 laps).

What happened during the race?

During the race, everything was going well. We were on-track for a 12 hour finish and managed our navigation ok. I did the navigating, since I'd seen old books 1-6 already. We did ok navigating to the new book one, though I screwed the pooch on Stallion Mountain and we wasted 20 minutes being lost. I was slower on the climbs, but I could fly past many people on the descents and surprisingly, we collected a bunch of Barkley virgins. We caught a good number who were physically stronger at the start (maybe left the gate too quickly). We also eventually dropped many of the people we collected because we were moving faster than they were. Things were good. We picked up a French guy who didn't speak a lick of English. A couple hours in, I finally screwed up the courage to try talking in

French. It's been AGES and I never was really good at it anyway. Spend 10 hours talking French, though, and you finally get comfortable with it... that was fun, and that guy stayed with us the entire time.

The race involves a hill, a decent, another couple of hills, another few descents, and then you get to Testicle Spectacle. This is a power line that goes up the mountain. Under it is a big fat ugly briar patch. About half a mile long. Yay, fun fun! I actually enjoyed going up that. The back side (Methlab Hill) is a great run down, too. A while later, you get to a really long ugly climb, called Rat Jaw. This is another power line - mile+ long, also briar patch. The briars had been cut down - they are trimmed every season so that workers can reach the power lines. Trimming, though, doesn't mean removing. And falling into a billion chopped-down briars is NOT fun. I think I fell half a dozen times. I'll post that video shortly..

After that, you get to the mysterious part of the race that you're not allowed to see before the actual race start. This involves the two biggest climbs in the race. First one, I worked my ass off and only lost 10 minutes to some folks we'd seen. We caught them on the downhill. The last hill, I lost 30 minutes to the vets we'd run into and never saw them again. Because I was feeling slow, I told my Racing Buddy to charge up with the Vets. We'd heard the next book was hard to find and he was strong. He did charge up with them... and it might have killed him. I certainly died on that climb. And my feet hurt like hell. A couple other folks were throwing up. We started down the final descent to camp. It's an hour long downhill run. My FEET KILLED. I felt good, otherwise, though, and put on some speed. Me and the French guy (incidentally, he won some pretty big name races, including a 300 mile Saharan desert crossing, so he was a pretty tough guy) took off at a 7-min mile pace down the trail. I'm guessing, I was tired, I might be overestimating, but I'm fairly confident in the speed. We really just let it all hang out and ran down the mountain. We ended up gapping my Racing Buddy by 20 minutes. That was probably a mistake.

As we all gathered together again and walked the last mile into camp, my buddy and I decided that if my feet were not bleeding,

we'd go out again. We were already past 12 hours, so we missed our goal, but so long as we got in before 13:20, we'd be allowed to go out on lap 2. We knew the next lap would take us 16-20 hours with nighttime navigation issues, etc., but we didn't want to quit.

If my feet were bleeding, though, I said I'd quit. The French guy said he was quitting no matter what - he was never going to come back to Barkley and in fact, he never wanted to see Tennessee again, even! Hahah... Barkley kills you, mentally. ☺ The one problem with our plan was that my Racing Buddy was physically doing ok. Unfortunately, he hadn't done any of the navigating on the first lap, so, if I quit, he was pretty much going to quit, too, since there was no way to do the navigation on your own, for the first time, in the dark. More on this "no way" later.

We got into camp and turned in our book pages. Then we went to our camp spot and I pulled off my shoes and socks.

End of the race, eh?

12 hours, 35 minutes. That's how long ONE LAP took. I was ready to go out and I felt strong (ok, and by that I mean I could probably do pushups but I probably couldn't squat a bag of M&Ms). However, my feet really hurt, so we pulled my socks off... blood. Well, sort of. Maceration. I'll talk about that more in a sec since most people aren't familiar. But yeah, my feet = nastiness. And that was that. No more race. I was pissed, but half-way relieved. At least I didn't have to machismo up and do another lap!

What's maceration?

Maceration - this is what happens when your feet get wet and then you put them through lots of pulling and pushing and rubbing. Think about how pruned up your feet get after you've

been in a bath/jacuzzi/whatever for an hour? Now imagine what they'd be like after 12 hours. Now add a ton of friction from the extremely steep terrain (which causes your feet to slide around, and as the shoe is wet, it's softer, so it allows more movement). That causes the really soft skin to fold over on itself. These folds are painful and as they get pulled and pushed about, big chunks of skin can tear. Mine started to tear inside the folds. Well, not really. The insides of the crevasses of the folds can sometimes become very thin, and then they become blood red, but no actual breakage occurs. It takes a lot (I've never been there) to have skin actually tear. It's usually just extremely painful. That's why I stopped.

After I quit, I cleaned up my feet, filled the cracks and folds with neosporin, and used witch hazel and foot powder to dry the feet. A bunch of skin ended up dying and sloughing off (a few days later). 12 hours after I cleaned and treated them, there was no more pain. 24 hours later, I took a crew member of another runner's, and showed him some sections of trail. We ran together for maybe 40 minutes. At the end of that, I had blisters on both thumb toes and on both heels. I guess the macerated but now dried skin was still weak.

Ok, so what really ended your race?

Barkley is steep as fuck.

Seriously. I am not **in** shape to climb so much steep. People told me that it was going to be steep. Words don't do it justice. The numbers on paper, though impressive (several hills greater than 35% grade), don't mean anything until you're stringing together "barely reasonable hill" after "barely reasonable hill." You can climb and descend any one of the hills at Barkley and think to yourself "that's not too bad" though inside, you'll probably think "wow, that kind of sucked!" String together all the hills at Barkley, though, and "barely reasonable" becomes "absolutely insane."

Physically, I was unprepared for this race. But mentally, everyone who knows me, *knows* that nothing can stop me mentally, right?

Two of the three finishers (yes, this year, 3 people finished, one breaking the course record AND becoming the first person to finish Barkley twice, now making it 12 people who have finished Barkley) had maceration. I had helped one of them treat his feet between laps 4 and 5. I'd also helped other racers treat their feet. I had heard that another finisher had massive maceration issues by half way through the race, and he wasn't eating enough, so he was running lower on energy. Many people had maceration. A select few people chose to continue running on their macerated feet. It hurts. So what?

I probably would not have admitted this any time since the race until this week, but this week, I have come to accept the fact that Barkley not only beat me physically, but it also beat me mentally. I looked for, and found an excuse not to continue. C'mon, people ran another 40+ hours on macerated feet... In the very back of my head, I celebrated when I saw my Racing Buddy's face when he saw my feet as I pulled my socks off slowly. He winced at how bad they looked. And somewhere in my head, I celebrated. Yay! My feet are jacked; we don't have to go out!

What was a low point for you, and what was a high point during the race?

The low point of Barkley, aside from the pre-race mental defeat I suffered temporarily, was climbing that last big hill, when I said that I lost at least 30 minutes to the people who were near me. One of those people was Frozen Ed. He's 64 years old. He's the guy I was talking to, before the race, who told me "you're too slow" when I told him how long it took me to get to various points on the course during my recon missions. As we climbed from the Beech Tree up the hill, Frozen Ed just dusted me as if I was standing still (I think I was, several times). My head was full of piss and vinegar. I was pissed at myself

for being out of shape, pissed at the mountain for being so steep, frustrated, angry, mad, sad, everything.

The high point of the race was actually running down Rat Jaw at full speed, falling a dozen times into briars, hurting like nuts, and just loving it. I turned on my camera after I realized that the run down would be comical and would be worth catching. "I'M GODDAMN DOING BARKLEY!" And maybe a second high point occurred after I called it quits, I really enjoyed talking to people, giving various foods that might be useful for runners having problems eating enough calories, to their crews, and helping various runners with their feet as they came in from laps and prepared to go out again.

What about the Barkley Movie?

There was a film crew making a documentary on this year's Barkley. I wanted to film my experience. I got in contact with them and volunteered to run a lap of the race wearing a GoPro. I wore a GoPro Hero HD2 during my lap. Since batteries last about 2 hours, I turned the camera on and off and recorded a total of a bit over 6 hours of my 12 hour lap. I had spare batteries and memory cards in my backpack. I provided all the footage to the film crew. Hopefully, the runner's perspective is useful to them. And when I have some downtime, I'll pull together a few minutes of my favorite footage and post it up.

Are you going to do Barkley again?

ABSOLUTELY. If I can get in, for 2013, I will be there in a heartbeat. I'm dedicating this entire year to getting into Barkley-shape. It's my goal now, to redeem myself. This is the first race or event I've done that has defeated me mentally. I want revenge!